

MOAI MAIL: STAMP COLLECTING AND EASTER ISLAND

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SHORT OF ACTUALLY VISITING RAPA NUI, what is the (sometimes) cheapest way you can indulge your passion for that place? Well, you can collect postcards or carvings, or some of those tiki mugs one can find for sale on eBay. As for me, I have been involved for the past few years in a search for letters and stamps either from the island, or with an Easter Island theme. Combine the cancellations and cachets of the Easter Island post office, letters from or about the island and stamps issued mainly by Chile, and you will have a very interesting collection.

The search is far from easy. Ask any stamp dealer if he has any Easter Island mail, and he is likely to give you either a quick "no" or a look suggesting you are one of the quirkier specimens of our species. Even Chilean philatelists (yes, there are quite few in that gorgeous country) do not have much of a supply. Just to track down the fifty or so Chilean moai stamps is quite a task. And early letters, from the 19th and early 20th century, are extremely rare. So little is actually known of this period that there are still chances of undiscovered rarities, perhaps in old correspondences, sailors' letters, etc.

One example is the George Cooke correspondence. Cooke was a US Navy surgeon who served on a number of American Naval vessels in the 1880s and early 1890s. During his time of service, he wrote many letters home to his wife. Over the past few years, some of these have turned up on eBay, where they have been sold for fairly reasonable prices. Cooke's relationship with Easter Island involves his service with the USS *Mohican*. After visiting many ports in the Pacific, the *Mohican* stopped at Easter Island for about one month in late 1886. During this time, Cooke helped investigate many of the island's archaeological remains. When the ship reached Chile, Cooke sent several letters home. Two are of particular interest: one was sent in February of 1887; the other in April of the same year. While the contents are not recorded, they likely contained references to the island.

Also known to exist are letters from early visitors to the island, such as Policarpo Toro, Katherine Routledge, Alfred Métraux, and the Chilean missionaries. However, if the envelopes had any markings showing their origin as Easter Island, these have not been recorded.

One fascinating envelope is known from 1910. In that

year, the yawl *Pandora* – on a round-the-world voyage – stopped at Easter, where the crew prepared, but did not mail, correspondence. This perhaps was due to the fact that supply ships rarely came to the island. In any event, Chilean stamps were applied, but they were over-written with "Isla de Pascua," no cancel being available. The envelopes were carried on the *Pandora* around Cape Horn to New Island in the Falklands where there was a whaling station with a post office. The letter was cancelled at New Island, with this very rare marking. Because this item is probably unique (through at one time there probably was another letter, as two similarly inscribed stamps are known); its value cannot be estimated.

Sometimes what isn't found can be just as important as what can be found. In 1916, the yacht *Carnegie*, under command of J. P. Ault, visited Easter Island following its circumnavigation of Antarctica. Ault reported that no Chilean ship had been to the island in a year and a half. He also reported taking letters from the island's Governor and mailing them in Buenos Aires, and mentioned that mail was left on the island (none of these letters were ever received.) He placed "valuable Rapa Nui stamps" on the covers. This is an odd reference because no stamps specifically for Easter

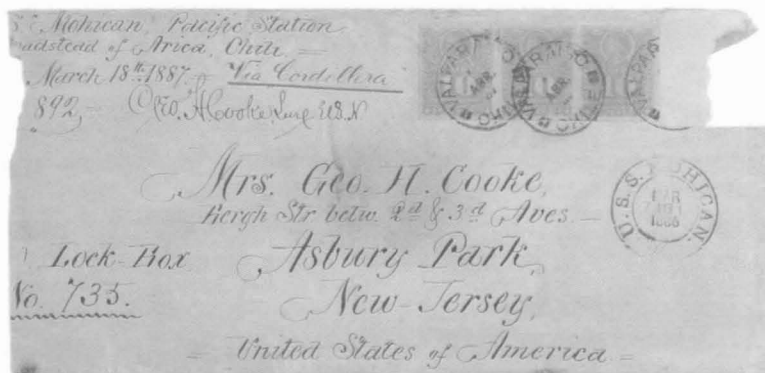
Island are known to exist from that time.

A few older Chilean stamps are known to have a "Rapa Nui" overprint, but these are thought by experts to be fakes. I believe they are fakes, mainly because no Chilean authority would allow the native name for the island to be used, instead of the Spanish "Isla de Pascua." Finding such a cover would be an important discovery.

The first letters with markings showing origination at Easter Island come from the Chilean Navy. These began to appear in the early 1930s and are circular or oval in shape and usually say something like "Subdelegación Marítima Isla de Pascua," or "Apostadero Naval Sección Isla de Pascua."

Also known, although very rare, is mail originating from the companies that controlled the sheep ranch on the island. The Compañía Explotadora Isla de Pascua, as well as the shipping company of Valparaíso, Haverbeck and Skarwelt, had postal cachets.

Possibly the most common mail (a relative term for any early Easter Island material) was carried by the first



A letter from George Cooke to his wife. It has the USS *Mohican* cancellation. It was sent following Cooke's visit to Easter Island.

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airplane flights to touch down on the island. For most of its history, the island lacked an airstrip, so such arrivals had to be made by flying boats. This was hazardous due to the lack of good harbors and the rough character of the coastline.

On 19 January 1951, a proving flight was made from La Serena, Chile, to the island by a Catalina 405 flying boat nicknamed *Manutara*. The pilot was Robert Parrague Singer and he carried along a few souvenir letters with an appropriate four-line marking in Spanish. After a bit more than 19 hours, the plane arrived off Mataverí. Although damaged and unable to return, it did prove that air flight to the island was possible.

Just a few months later, a much more ambitious flight took place, a flying boat called the *Frigate Bird II*. Patrick Taylor, an internationally known pilot who pioneered flights in New Guinea, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific was the pilot. Taylor's goal was to fly from Australia to Chile with stops in Fiji, Samoa, and Easter Island. The flight left Sydney on 12 March 1951 and reached Valparaíso on 26 March; he returned to Australia in April. More covers of several types were carried on this flight; those that carry markings from Australia or Chile are common and worth only a few dollars. However, those carrying the naval marking then available on Easter Island – a double ring design with a star – are very rare.

The first civilian post office was opened on the island in late 1953. Heretofore the Navy or the company that ran the island's sheep ranch was responsible for what little mail was carried but, from that time, about a dozen postmarks are known, plus many decorative cachets.

Some of the postmarks have interesting designs. Five of them depict various illustrations of *moai*, some with more than one example and one shows a birdman allegory. The cachets are colorful, some showing three *moai* in a row or one in an oval shape. There also is one that I suspect may have stirred up a bit of controversy in Chile. It's wording is in German and it shows a *rei-miro*, the symbol of the Rapanui indigenous movement.

One of the most interesting items to come from the island during this early period is what is known as the

"pentothal card." Some advertising genius working for Abbott Laboratories in the 1960s had a plan to attract attention to their product. Doctors were sent a postcard with a suitable photo from some exotic place (Pitcairn, Easter, Tahiti, or the Antarctic, but the side of the card with the cancel (all legitimate) carried an advertisement for Pentothal anesthesia.

The year that Mataverí airport opened in 1967 marked a real revolution for the island. Now groups of tourists were able to visit the island and they added to the demand for postal services in order to send souvenir postcards and letters home with the island cancel. The airport's opening led to two other events that proved very important, not only for stamp collectors, but the island as a whole. The first, in April 1967, was the arrival of the first organized tourist group to fly to the island, led by the pioneer of adventure tourism, Lars Eric Lindblad. Lindblad was aware of the advertising value of souvenir mail and his ships created dozens of such covers on the Antarctic voyages. The group arrived via LANChile and the visit lasted from 9 to 14 April. It was only for the hardest traveler. There were 41 participants who must have paid a handsome fee to join the group. They were accommodated in tents near the runway and one shocked survivor remembered that everyone had to share a single washbasin. It is thought that

over 2000 souvenir covers were prepared; some with a privately overprinted stamp reading "Isla de Pascua." A number of these were sent to those on Lindblad's regular mailing list.

Easter Island assumed international significance when France began nuclear testing in the Pacific. With the agreement of Chilean authorities, US military forces came to the island and set up a tracking system. Mail and supplies were delivered by parachute from flights originating in Panama. The camp, which lasted until 1971, had an Army Post Office number (09877) assigned to it. However, Chilean nationalists objected to this foreign intrusion and the post office was not activated. The base commander had two covers made secretly, with a strike of the postal canceller. Today these would be among the most rare pieces of postal history from



One of the first Chilean stamps to mention Rapa Nui. Issued in 1940, it shows a picture of Policarpo Toro along with a *kavakava* woodcarving figure.



Envelope of the Concorde World Tour with a Rapa Nui stamp and a November 1988 cancellation.

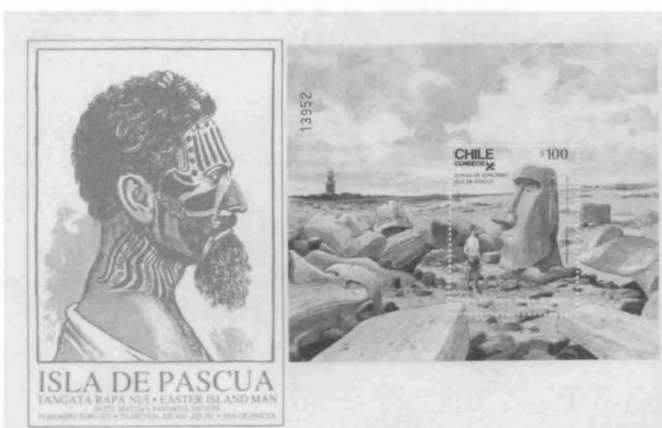
either Easter Island or the American military. When Allende came into power in Chile, the Americans were given 24 hours to leave the island.

One of the more fascinating recent occurrences commemorated by souvenir mail were the Concorde flights that touched down on the island. In 1987, a company called "Prado Voyages" arranged an around-the-world Concorde flight. This must have been financially successful because at least two more are known for the 1990s. All had a variety of souvenir mail carried along on the flights, and these are popular with island collectors as well as those who search for flight covers.

Unlike many other smaller islands, Rapa Nui has never had its own postage stamps, solely for its own use. In contrast, tiny Pitcairn with less than 50 inhabitants has issued several hundred stamps since 1940 and derives a large part of its government budget from their sale.

Since 1940, La Empresa de Chile has recognized that Easter Island is a popular subject for stamps and has issued some 55 island-themed stamps. They are valid for mail throughout the country. Many of them feature various views of *moai*, but some of the images show "generic" statues. Scenes from the slopes of Rano Raraku are popular. One well-known *moai* was shown on an English stamp; this stamp was released in 2002 and was part of a series showing British Museum antiquities; it shows Hoa Hakananai'a, originally from the site of 'Orongo. Other common subjects are woodcarvings or birdman petroglyphs. Several booklet panes of four designs were released in the 1980s (Sc. 780-83 are numbers assigned to these.)

A few stamps show detailed maps of the island. Sc.1286, for example, clearly shows the three major volcanoes. Sc. 1381 a-b illustrate a map also, but less detailed. However, it covers two stamps. Maps also form a part of the designs of the last four Easter Island issues.



A commemorative envelope from Hotu Matua's Favorite Shoppe on Easter Island along with a stamp showing the ruins at Tongariki.



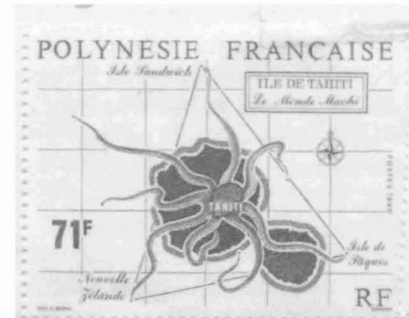
Easter Island stamps illustrating the local marine fauna. This is a beautiful set of images, issued in 1992

Petroglyphs and *rongorongo* boards can be seen on Sc. 794, 1322 and 1324. Carved stone heads and small *moai* are on others.

Strangely, Chile has not noted on its stamps any famous foreign explorers who visited the island. Some Chileans have been so honored, however: Policarpo Toro is shown on several stamps B1 in 1945, Sc. 383 and C298, and 791. Lay Brother Eyraud is on B2.

Several issues have been released that relate to flights to the island. In 2001, Sc.1358, one of a block of four, noted the 50th anniversary of the *Manutara* flight. Number 413, from 1971, notes the first scheduled LANChile flight between Santiago and Tahiti. Oddly, it shows an aircraft flying low across 'Anakena Bay, a view not seen in reality. In 1974, no less than four stamps noted the opening of the Sydney-Santiago route.

Two stamps issued by French Polynesia in 1991 created a sensation in Chile. The Sc. 535 and 560 stamps had island themes, one showing an octopus with its tentacles around I'le de Pâques. Chileans assumed the French were about to grab their island possession, and the uproar that resulted caused the stamps to be recalled.



The French Polynesian stamp that caused a furor in Chile in 1991. They were recalled by the French government.

¹ When collectors identify or describe a stamp, they use a catalogue number. In the US, the most common catalogue is the *Scott Stamp Catalogue*, issued yearly. They can cost well over \$130. In England, the *Stanley Gibbons* catalogue is in use; these are mostly found in continental or specific country editions. Chile also has specialized catalogues but they are hard to find. Prices quoted may not be the price you would pay from a dealer.)

With the exception of the Polynesian stamps, which are worth a mild premium, none of the Chilean issues should cost more than a few dollars each. Most dealers have some in stock and they also can be found on eBay. Covers are another matter. First Day of Issue souvenir envelopes have been issued by Empresa de Chile, but not in any great numbers. Some of the Concorde flight covers can be worth \$40 or more, when they can be found. As for the earlier items, prices of hundreds of dollars can be expected. Condition is a major aspect of value¹.

Easter Island philatelists have other options for collecting. Chile has issued several aerogrammes, one showing the *moai* at Anakena; another the lake at Rano Kau. Either of these sent from the island would be of great interest to a collector.

Collectors also like QSL cards, the privately printed cards by ham radio enthusiasts to note their contacts. Since the 1950s there have been ham radio operators, both military and civilian, on the island. Occasionally they will form "expeditions" and travel to exotic locations, such as Easter Island and try to contact thousands of other hobbyists around the world. I have recorded over thirty of these cards so far. At times they will have postal cancellations, while others are dispatched to central clearing offices.

Stamp collectors have formed hundreds of specialist societies although there are none for Easter Island. However, there is a Chile Collector's Society and a Pacific Islands Study Group out of Great Britain. Each publishes quarterly journals that occasionally carry articles about the island.

If anyone possesses copies of mail used from the island, particularly early items, I would very much like to know about it. A book is in preparation (by the author); it will include illustrated lists of markings, stamps, and QSL cards. A notice will be in *Rapa Nui Journal* when it becomes available. My thanks to David Maddock of England, and Sr. Oscar Medina Rojas of Chile for their information and materials for this article.

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Making Clay Moai as an Interdisciplinary Activity with Middle School Students, International School of Düsseldorf

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IN THE 7TH GRADE GERMAN CLASSES at the International School of Düsseldorf, Germany, we read the novel "Motu-Iti," which takes place on Easter Island. The students learned about the history of this unique island and its isolated location. The students were very impressed not only by the location but especially by the making and transporting of the *moai*. Having read additional texts and found more information from websites and viewing videos on this topic, including the movie "Rapa Nui," we started an interdisciplinary unit, making clay *moai*. Combining the knowledge acquired in their classes with art classes we started this very special unit.

First the students had to choose which type of moai they would like to produce. For their research they used various websites to view examples of the statues. They first had to draw the moai from three different perspectives: front, side and back. The drawings helped the students when they began to form their clay moai. This activity was supported by our MS Art Teacher who introduced various techniques and explained how to form the basic shape using the drawings made by the students and additional pictures from the internet. The students found it difficult to reach to the stage where an observer could have recognized their model as a *moai*. They indicated that making a *moai* with clay was nothing compared to the making of a real one on Rapa Nui. They were even more impressed with the abilities of handcraft and artwork of the people who built the created the statues.

This special activity was valuable for the students because it helped them realize how difficult it is to form a statue using with only some tools. They have gained respect and agreed that they found it very interesting to learn about this extraordinary place in the world. When asked if they would be interested in visiting this special island, all expressed an interest in traveling to Rapa Nui in order to take a look at the real *moai*. Perhaps in the future they might have the chance to visit the island and hopefully will remember what they found out in their research in 7th grade when reading the novel "Motu-Iti" and making their models of a *moai* out of clay.

They have managed to create good models of typical stone figures and these will be exhibited in the MS Resource Center of the International School of Düsseldorf, where they will be seen by all students, faculty and parents.

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